



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

WITH PEN IN HAND

By

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Letter writing seems to be a lost art. At one time in our history, people became famous merely for their ability to be articulate with pen and paper. What is not as well known among firefighters about the Father of the American Fire Service, Benjamin Franklin is the fact that he was not only an advocate of the fire department, but also a prolific letter writer.

One can go to many different libraries around the world to find copies of correspondence penned by him to the locals that helped determine American political philosophy as well as other economic issues.

In modern society, we tend to regard letter writing as a necessary evil but not something to be enjoyed. Some might even try to make the case that with the proliferation of the email system, the concept of letter writing has now been reduced to a series of acronyms and verbal shortcuts.

On the other hand, if you are in the fire prevention business, there are times when you are going to have to write a letter that has a meaning. In fact, when conducting the process of enforcing fire codes, especially when there are serious issues at hand that are contentious, there can be demands that you have letter writing skills.

Unfortunately, the task of letter writing is not well practiced in the beginning steps of becoming a firefighter and then moving your way up the ranks. To the contrary, we have reduced most paperwork in the firehouse into very simple log entries and/or checking off boxes on forms. The entire idea of writing comprehensive letter doesn't really begin to emerge until you reach the ranks of a chief officer.

Even at the rank of chief officer it is still not a well-respected skill set. In my own personal experience, I found that when I achieved the rank of battalion chief, I had to revisit those skills in order to survive the interchange between the operations of fire prevention and City Hall. Fortunately for me, I had an amazingly competent secretary who had the ability to counsel and discipline me at the same time.

The purpose of this column is to have you think about why letter writing skills are important and put into place some practices that will encourage you and members of your staff to do a better job of completing written correspondence. At one level, this column probably shouldn't even be necessary because if you have gone to class to get an AA or Bachelor's Degree, and especially if you have reached a Master's Degree level, you are bound to have taken some writing classes.



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Nonetheless, you have to conduct practice of what you have learned or it is a skill that will rapidly deteriorate.

The first item of suggestion is for you to obtain a copy of a book entitled “The Elements of Style”. This book has been in print as long as I can remember. It may well have been originally published as early as the 1920s. While it is a very small book, it contains a huge amount of information.

Secondarily, you should pursue the idea of having your own type of “style manual”. There are many opportunities for a chief officer to engage in writing practices but they are not all the same. For example, is there a distinct difference in writing styles between a casual letter between you and a friend and that of a letter citing violations of the fire codes? What about the difference in writing an SOP on how to conduct business as opposed to writing an instructional sheet for the training division?

Almost every type of correspondence in which we are going to provide words in a written form, there has to be a style to it. The more familiar you are with the various styles that are available the better off you are.

Let’s imagine that you are now sitting at your desk with a blank piece of paper and a pencil set out on the desktop. Or, if you are more modern, you can visualize that you just opened up a word processing document and the cursor is blinking on the screen where you are ready to start. What should be going through your mind as you begin to prepare for written correspondence?

The purpose of this article will be to give you a linear thought process that you can apply to almost any type of document that you are going to be working on. Remember practice makes perfect.

We are going to give you a five step process that you might want to incorporate when you are just beginning to develop your skill as a writer. The reason I suggest this as an incipient skill rather than experienced one is that after a while some of these factors will come almost naturally rather than having to think about them consciously. However there are some differences that come about by paying attention to these five points that will help you do a better job of drafting the document that you will ultimately see utilized.

Step 1 – For example, the first thing you should ask yourself is what type of document am I about to prepare? Is it an email, is it a memo, is it a letter, or is it a policy statement? In reality, the appropriateness of communications has a lot to do with the degree of formality or informality



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in the written document. You are a lot more accountable in formal writings. The document must be incredibly accurate if it is official representation of your rank and position. But by the same token you are not devoid by possible criticism even in informal documents if you don't pay attention to accuracy.

You have probably heard of the Freedom of Information Act. It is a piece of federal legislation that requires that under some circumstances individuals outside of your organization have the right to request copies of everything that you have written down on the particular subject. You might take into consideration that when you begin every single document somebody else may require that it be made into a public document at some point.

You might think that this is trivial but it certainly isn't. In fact, there have been many lawsuits determined by statements made or not made informal processes by evidence derived from the Freedom of Information Act requests.

So the first question is, what is the formality of the document, what are you dealing with? You need to make sure that the tenor of the letter is appropriate for the level of communications and you should not be making statements that you cannot prove later on.

You might wasn't to spend a few seconds on the internet becoming familiar with FOIA. It has been around since 1966 and has undergone many challenges and revisions.

Step 2 – To whom is this document going to be addressed? One of the considerations you have in developing correspondence is when you are writing to someone very specifically, i.e. your boss or one of your employees it is different than if you are communicating with an outside party, i.e. someone who has violated the fire code or an architect who is asking for an interpretation.

What kind of background do you have on that person? What do you know about what they know? When we use the term level of communications, we are not implying that one level is more important than another but rather that each level of communications has a different level of expectation of accuracy and comprehension.

I once received some advice about working my way up through the ranks of a large organization that if you can't summarize a main idea for a major policy person in an organization, they will seldom read past the second page. So succinctness has a lot to do with the level.

Generally speaking the higher the person you are communicating with the more you have to get to the point and get there quickly. The inverse may be required if you have to have an awful lot of detail engaged to get the person up to speed on what is being talked about.



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Facts are what make written communication work best. Opinions often can be expressed but unless they are supported by facts, they usually don't survive the scrutiny of review.

Step 3 is a matter of deciding exactly what format you are going to put this communications into. Let me shift for just a minute and move away from the more bureaucratic aspects of written documents and suggest that you might be preparing a press release. Do you know what the proper format is for a press release? What about submitting a magazine article? Is there a difference between an instruction sheet in the training division and a policy process in the fire prevention bureau?

The more that you develop a standardized means of communications, using specific forms, the more likely that you will have a consistent pattern in your communication. What I am saying essentially is don't write a memo type of response and then put it out in a letter format. A letter carries more weight. A memo is usually designed to be disposed of. The more you practice the idea of making sure the format fits the topic, the more effective you will become in achieving your objectives with your targeted audience.

Step four has a system to it. Now it is time to put your thoughts into some kind of logical framework. I will remind you of Roger Kipling's famous poem, "the Five Serving Men". If you are familiar with that poem, Kipling alluded to the fact that who, what, when, how, where and why often lead to the answer of how to do something.

As you begin to prepare your facts to be included in your correspondence, you should try to answer those kinds of questions. What is the most important point? What is the most important individual to get the information? How should they do it once they have been informed?

Personally I like to use several different types of techniques that help me collect my thoughts as I am putting together an article. One of these is to use what they call "mind mapping". Mind mapping is nothing more than sitting down and sketching out a diagram on a piece of paper of the different thoughts you have about a topic with a main theme right in the center of the page. As a matter of fact the five w's and the h I mentioned earlier can often be drawn out as extensions like tentacles from the main topic and you can start answering these questions yourself.

Another method I use is called the Crawford Slip Method. The Crawford Slip Method is nothing more than sitting down with a handful of 3 x 5 cards and starting to organize your thoughts by writing one thought on each card. Not unlike a deck of playing cards, you will eventually end up with a stack of different thoughts. Then you can shuffle them and put them into some form of



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logical order. That logical order may go from very, very generic information down to very specific. Or it can go from a chronological sequence. The manner in which you organize the Crawford Slip is not really as important as the fact that the Crawford Slips help identify all the points that name the correspondence.

Regardless of what ritual you create for yourself, writing is a great deal associated with organizing your thoughts before you worry about what goes on the piece of paper. I have often heard people say that they have “writers block”. My question back to them is “do you have talker’s block?” This often results in a very quizzical look on their face. So, I follow it up by asking them if they have any thoughts that they can express to me about what we are talking about. More often than not, the person expresses the fact that yes, they do. I then introduce them to either the Crawford Slip or the Mind Mapping method and say - go to work.

I am not suggesting that this is simple. What I am suggesting is that it works better if you have a method to structure what you are doing to get your detail together to answer your questions.

My last step is the one that a lot of people never get around to. You create a draft document. Drafts are not permanent. The Constitution of this Country, which was penned by a large variety of individuals, in a very complex group setting, went through so many drafts that nobody actually knows the number. Going back to my alluding to Benjamin Franklin, he was one of the individuals who participated in the draft revision process.

I have no doubt in my mind that as I read the Constitution today, I am reading Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams and all of the others who were at the Constitution event. The Constitution is their collective words, not just one person’s perspective.

It is important that when you put your draft together that you focus primarily on the structure not the actual individual words. Granted you may just have to pick just a very specific word to make a specific point. The name of the game is to get the draft in some kind of format that you can critique it and moreover you can talk it over with other people to critique it.

Have you utilized the correct format? Have you developed a target audience and have you addressed it in your draft? What details are important and what is the sequence with which those details must be revealed to make sense. Is the document written to the appropriate knowledge level of the recipient? Does the document contain a vocabulary that is consistent with that level of understanding? Does the document address all of the issues? Does the document identify a problem and provide a solution?



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In summary, written communications should represent your best thought process to get the results that you were hoping to achieve. Written correspondence is different than arguing your case verbally. While correspondence may often serve as the framework for an oral presentation a written document needs to be able to stand on its own merits.

As you proceed through your fire service career, especially if you achieve the rank of a fire chief, there is a possibility that your reputation and even your credibility may rest on your ability to be able to do a good job with written communications. Practice may not make you perfect, but practice will make you more confident that you can achieve your objectives in the long run.

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